Evaluation of the Belorussian National Movement

186 So as to bring to a close our observations, which cover many years, we will try to provide an answer to the question whether the national movement in Belorussia was really a positive factor, whether it was of any genuine use to the Belorussian nation, and whether it justified the collossal number of bloody sacrifices which were offered up on the altar of nationalism. In our modest opinion the Belorussian national movement was unconditionally a positive factor in the history of the Belorussian nation, imparting a powerful impetus to the elevation of the national consciousness of the masses, to their cultural regeneration, and to the unprecedented development of national literary creativity, close to and understood by the national masses. As a result of the national advancement, which often lapsed into enthusiasm, the most talented and able figures came forward in all fields of the cultural and economic life of the region. Thanks to these self-sacrificing efforts a high level of research was maintained; there were unquestionable successes in the study of the historic past of the Belorussian nation; a firm foundation was laid for cognizance and study of the natural resources of the region and their eventual exploitation. Of invaluable service to the nation was the circumstance that the old generation of Belorussians was able to inculcate the young students who were their disciples with a love for the work of regenerating the Belorussian nation and to arouse their enthusiasm and unwavering faith in a happy future. The two generations united in a solid front and set to work to accomplish the tasks lying before them. It was fruitful and successful for the simple reason that the struggle did not involve the realization of some kind of abstract idea, as often as not difficult to understand and diffuse, nor was it directed against any particular class nor for any particular class but for the nation as a whole. The goal was clear and the road straight. The young generation was educated to follow the example of the Belorussian leaders, and the time will yet come when it will serve as the foundation for a further advance.

181 The national movement had still another positive aspect. It broke down the perverted concepts which the other peoples of Russia held about the Belorussians, their culture, way of life, manners, and customs; also it clarified the possibilities for an economic development in Belorussia. As far back as tsarist times there had been isolated

attempts to begin a study of the region. /73/ In addition to these /8/
well-intentioned efforts there were also superficial, frequently
unobjective, studies which put the country on a false track, creating a mistaken impression about Belorussia. The materials on Belorussia were of a peculiar nature, failing to take its historic past into consideration and failing to make sufficient allowance for the tragic consequences of the continual craving of the East and West to master the territory of Belorussia and to denationalize its people. Consequently even such reliable sources of information as the Encyclopedia of Ephron and Brockhaus included some completely biased information about Belorussia and its people. Even Belorussian writers themselves, sincere patriots though they may have been, in some instances distorted the Belorussian reality in their works during the period of creative activity before the 1917 revolution. They resorted to unnecessary exaggeration in portraying the downtrodden state and oppression of the Belorussian peasantry and the severity and impoverished condition of the land. They consciously underemphasized all aspects of this world which were alive and vigorous. Nor were the pre-revolutionary school textbooks objective, especially as concerns geography, since they customarily portrayed the Belorussians as a nation sickly and uneducated, backward and with a primitive mode of life and the Belorussian geography as nothing but a swamp. Through this an erroneous impression was created. The literary, operatic, and theatrical productions, as well as the historical studies in agriculture, which appeared during the flowering of the national movement were certainly not inferior to and in some cases better than those produced by the other nationalities of the Soviet Union. More than that, these scholarly works, literary productions, and periodicals found their way into libraries and university archives in the United States and other western countries where they became the objects of study. They were of great assistance in distinguishing between Belorussia and the series of other guberniyas and oblast's of the Soviet Union. Thus by chance we became aware that in the main library of the city of Columbus a large number of volumes of the scholarly works (in Belorussian) of the Gorets Agricultural Academy are being preserved, together with those of the University of Belorussia and the Academy of Sciences. Even though these works were burned by the N.K.V.D. generally, and particularly when their authors were arrested, still there is the

181 certainty that they have been preserved here in the free world and sooner or later will come into the possession of the Belorussian nation. The time is at hand when the western world will become better acquainted with this remote and almost unknown country.

180 The national movement in Soviet Belorussia exerted a positive influence outside its borders also, upon western Belorussia. The heroic activity and determination of Belorussian patriots strengthened the perseverence of the conscious part of the Belorussian population of Poland, preventing it from yielding to enforced colonization and helping it to preserve its national ties and to use every available means to oppose the advances of Polish chauvinists in their attempts to denationalize the Belorussians. In spite of the closing of all Belorussian national schools in western Belorussia, the intelligentsia studied and learned Belorussian literature, preserved its language, and remained devoted to the nation.

Leading figures of the Belorussian national movement were destroyed, together with their pupils and followers. The Belorussian nation suffered a fearful loss and was left without its standard-bearers; the youth was almost totally deprived of its preceptors; the national values which had been created at such effort and expense were crushed out of existence. The ideals of the Belorussian nation had to be hidden deep underground. But did everything perish?--No! Sprouts have been prepared for a stormy growth and development, and those who have gone before will remain as shining examples for an oppressed Belorussia. And the rebirth to come will be the most valuable remembrance and the richest monument to those Belorussians who gave up their lives for the good of the nation.

12: Vakar U-4 (no date) 1949 RC1 Byelorussia RC1

similarity between Belbog of Slavic and Bäldäg of Teutonic mythology, they suggested that the Belorussians might be really Balts, and not Slavs at all: *Bělbog*—White God; *Bäldäg*—White Day; *Balts*—the Whites; *Mare Balticum*—White Sea; Belorussians—White Russians—*Baltic* Russians.[10] Indeed, if Belorussia and the Baltic are called "white" for the same reason, albeit in different languages, they must belong together. Mythology and linguistics do not always yield to political purposes. The attempt to separate the Belorussians from the Slavic family did not develop further, and was for some time abandoned.

In 1948, however, the idea reappeared in a periodical published by Belorussian emigrants in the American Zone of Germany. An editorial concedes that the Belorussians "borrowed" many important characteristics, both positive and negative, from the Slavs, but urges "not to close our eyes to the fact that the most valuable characteristics of our national psychology are of Baltic origins, such as general reliability, steadiness, tenacity, dynamism, strong resistance to pressure, mental reserve, etc. We must stress our *baltism*, and not only our slavism." The editorial ends by suggesting a "Federation of Baltic peoples," composed of *Belorussia*, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.[11] One can see how a linguistic, though dilettante, interpretation of a name might possibly alter the political map.

Another explanation of the term "White Russia" has been seen in the fact that *běla*, *běl'* were words used for money, perhaps because of the white color of silver. Only scant evidence of this exists before the fifteenth century, when we first find that in Novgorod, 1 bela=1 kuna. The Primary Chronicle mentions *běla*, *běl'* very vaguely. But it appears more frequently in the Lithuanian chronicles (*metriki*), and in documents concerning the Western Dvina region, i.e. the territory more or less connected with present Belorussia.[12] Adjectives often appear as second derivations of a radical which has lost its original meaning, or acquired a special meaning in addition to the original: cf. *zelënyj* (green); *zelen'* (green paint, vegetation); *zelënyj gorod*, *zelënyj šum*, *molodo da zeleno* (garden city, rustle of leaves in a forest, young and immature). A sequence: *belyj* (white)—*bel'* (whiteness, silver, coin)—*belyj* (wealthy, rich) would be quite possible; and *belaja Rus'* would mean "the rich, wealthy part of Russia" which would be historically correct for the era in question.

Unfortunately, there are also serious objections to this interpreta-

[10] *Kryvič* (Kaunas, 1923), IV, 30. Cf. Lith. *báltas*; *balù*, *bálti*, "to appear white."
[11] *Bac'kaŭščyna* (Oberhofer, Germany), II, No. 4 (7) (Feb. 15, 1948), 1. Italics mine.
[12] *Belorusskij Arkhiv*, II, 18, 50.